



# Rethinking climate change strategy for national governments

Climate change: the challenge for social democracy

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Copenhagen has been seen by many as a setback for global action on climate change. But in truth it could provoke the rethink that has long been needed. National governments hold the key to our long-term prosperity, acting domestically and in concert with others. Social democrats can lead successful domestic transitions by articulating climate change policies that deliver on economic and social grounds as well as environmental ones. Fostering public support is key: the opportunity to secure wealth creation and employment from the process of low-carbon transition is waiting to be grasped. Internationally, we need to rebuild momentum by stepping up co-operation in areas where there is already agreement, and in other areas by developing a shared analysis of the need for action.

“10 days to save the world” said the New Statesman. “11 days to save the world” said Prospect. “12 days to save the world” said The Independent.<sup>1</sup>

Politicians, campaigners and the media all portrayed the UN Copenhagen summit as the defining moment in the struggle to avert catastrophic climate change. Yet the Copenhagen summit did not “save the world”; indeed some reactions to the outcome presented it as effectively heralding the end of the world.<sup>2</sup> But both interpretations are mistaken. The real test of our success or failure is not the outcome of a single summit, but our ability to establish a political climate that enables government to act and achieve steep emissions cuts over the next five to ten years.

The Copenhagen summit exposed some painful truths about the disconnect between the science of climate change and the limited political commitment to tackling global emissions that exists in many of the key countries. It should be the trigger for a fundamental reappraisal of our approach to both global negotiations and national action.

The centre-left is in no position to excuse itself from this reflection. Many leading social democrats, including UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband, have argued that climate change is by its nature an issue for the left since governments will need to be willing to use the full range of their powers to tackle the problem successfully. Across the world, the evidence shows that parties of the left have been more concerned and active; indeed, in Australia, Germany and elsewhere, centre-left parties have made climate change a strong part of their campaign and offer.

But the record in taking sustained action and reducing emissions is very mixed, and there remains much room for improvement. Given growing public concern there is also every reason to seek to develop new approaches that are supported by both traditional constituencies and the environmental movement, as President Obama did so successfully in the US.

We’re rapidly running out of time to find an approach that will avert catastrophic climate change, as most leading experts agree we have just five to ten years to ensure that global emissions peak and then begin to decline rapidly. The issue could not be more serious: the future prosperity, security and survival of millions is at stake. Economic losses due to climate change already amount to more than \$100 billion per year; severe heat waves, forest fires, floods and storms will be responsible for as many as 500,000 deaths a year by 2030; and 25 million people are likely to be displaced if emissions are not brought under control.<sup>3</sup>

A new approach must focus, first and foremost, on developing strategies that strengthen both public support and political commitment to positive, meaningful action. Current levels of public

1. New Statesman: ‘10 days to save the world’ – 26th October 2009. Independent: ‘Climate change special: 12 days to save the world’ – 2nd December 2009. Prospect: ‘11 days to save the planet’ – November 2009.

2. John Sauven, Executive Director of Greenpeace UK: “The city of Copenhagen is a crime scene tonight, with the guilty men and women fleeing to the airport. There are no targets for carbon cuts and no agreement on a legally binding treaty. Quoted at [www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8421935.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8421935.stm)

3. Global Humanitarian Forum 2009, human impact report: the anatomy of a silent crisis.

understanding and support are too weak to sustain the scale of action that is needed, given the range of interventions required and their impact on individual lifestyles and choices. Our approach to future global action must reflect this imperative, accelerating national efforts, building trust, and ultimately delivering the treaty that is essential to cement international commitment. This essay outlines the key elements of the approach that national governments should now adopt.

### Learning the lessons of the past

A clear analysis of our successes and failures to date is a prerequisite for success. Despite the disappointing record, there has been remarkably little public or private reflection. The causes of our inadequate progress can be grouped into three areas: policy failure, problems arising from the structures of government, and deeper underlying issues related to politics and power relations.

The challenge of designing effective policy frameworks is substantial. This is perhaps the most complex policy challenge that national governments have ever faced. Climate change demands action across the silos of government, and a framework at national, regional and local level that is aligned with the global policy regime and provides effective incentives for businesses, communities and individuals. To date, many different policy frameworks have proved ineffective at managing these aims, and have thus failed to deliver projected emissions savings.

Many of these failures will be unsurprising to a social democratic audience. An over reliance on voluntary agreements and a reluctance to regulate has been a common cause of failure. Governments of the right in countries such as Australia and Canada have pursued

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overwhelmingly voluntary approaches, with predictably poor results; but centre-left governments have also often made these, and other, mistakes. For instance, both the left and right in Europe have been guilty of exaggerating the likely impact of emissions trading. The European trading scheme provides a fragile and short-term price signal that is far too weak to stimulate the investment needed in low-carbon energy sources. This in itself is enough to demonstrate that, if we are to succeed in future, there must be a much more sustained and consistent approach to regulatory solutions.

Why has the centre-left held back from this? In some circles, climate change is still regarded as an “environmental” issue and a distraction from the left’s core concerns. Yet this aside, the vast majority of social democrats now recognise that potential social and economic impacts make climate change an issue on which they must engage. But while there is consensus here, a further objection from some other social democratic thinkers is that tackling climate change infringes individual choice and quality of life, and thus we should focus wholly on technological change. Indeed, technology does have a vital role. But it is not a panacea. The science of climate change demands action now. The reality is that we must secure significant behavioural change on aviation and in regards to some other areas, such as individual energy consumption, if we are to avoid bequeathing an exceptionally poor quality of life to future generations.

A significant contributor to policy failure has been the structures of government. Responsibility for action in government is necessarily widely distributed across a variety of departments - housing, energy, transport, fiscal and others - each responsible for a different policy area. Yet almost all climate change strategies have been co-ordinated solely by departments of the environment, and as a result consistent action across government has rarely been forthcoming.

But the causes of our slow progress are more deep-rooted than failures of policy design and government processes. They are above all political. They pose profound challenges for social democrats seeking to design successful future strategies. Public opinion and the pessimistic stance adopted by certain sections of the business community have clearly been significant factors, shaping political attitudes and the policy response to climate change. While surveys of public attitudes to climate change in different countries show apparently high levels of concern in all countries,<sup>4</sup> and despite the recent rumblings around science and its sceptics, the key test of public opinion is attitudes to specific policy options. Proposals for new taxes and regulations have been defeated or curtailed on many occasions by business opposition and/or public hostility. Nevertheless, the high levels of public concern do suggest that there may be ways to develop policies that effectively tackle climate change and simultaneously command greater public support.

To do so successfully, we must address some of the other political challenges that climate change poses for modern democratic societies. By its very nature climate change has been a difficult issue to address in our overwhelmingly short-term culture, due to the long time lag between emissions and impacts. The time lag between government action and resulting emissions reductions has been an even more significant issue: too often, climate change policies do not deliver emissions reductions or political benefits sufficiently quickly to motivate political leaders and their electorates.

Finally, there are important issues of power relations, with vested interests resisting change at both national and international levels. During the first decade of climate change policy, businesses, particular in the energy and automotive sectors, were vigorous opponents. Attitudes have now shifted considerably, but very few businesses are openly supportive of the interventions needed to create sufficient incentives for the scale of low-carbon investment we so urgently need.

These are indeed daunting challenges, yet success is increasingly possible. We are now armed with 20 years of experience of climate change policy and politics, providing a wealth of knowledge from which to develop effective policy frameworks and, even more importantly, political strategies that will succeed. The social foundations for action are far stronger now than they have been before. The presence of over a hundred world leaders in Copenhagen would have been inconceivable even two years ago.

### **Making sense of Copenhagen**

Those who preached despair in the aftermath of Copenhagen are mistaken. While the outcome of the negotiations was deeply disappointing, the summit did make progress on some key issues. The Copenhagen Accord contained commitments to \$30 billion in short-term finance for 2010–12, processes for reporting national targets and progress, and the creation of a high-level group to agree how to mobilise \$100 billion per year by 2020.

This progress came from an extraordinarily intense diplomatic effort during 2009. As US attitudes changed dramatically, countries such as Australia, Japan and China all engaged with renewed vigour and openness in a succession of ministerial meetings to discuss the way forward.

There is a risk that the confusion of Copenhagen will deter political leaders from focusing on climate change, both domestically and internationally. So a shared analysis of the reasons for this disappointing outcome is critical.

4. The number of people describing climate change as “very serious” rose from 49 to 61 per cent in 2003 to 2006. These figures were consistently high across countries. By 2006, 90 per cent or more of those questioned in 19 out of 30 countries agreed that climate change was “serious”. GlobeScan, in association with the Programme on International Policy at the University of Maryland.

The UNFCCC process was a major cause. It has again proved agonisingly unwieldy. The summit and the preparatory meetings earlier in 2009 were all characterised by lengthy disputes over process that were astutely manipulated by those opposed to a strong outcome. These process problems exacerbate policy differences and make it very difficult to establish trust and a sense of shared endeavour. It is critical that we find more effective ways to conduct future international negotiations, whilst retaining the UN's primacy as the one body with truly global legitimacy.

But this was primarily a failure of politics. The final outcome showed that too many countries still perceive climate change to be an issue that must come second to concerns of economic growth and energy security, and do not recognise the critical importance of a stable climate to our future prosperity and security. The three issues are inextricably linked; economic growth and energy security cannot be achieved without coordinated national strategies to tackle rising global emissions.

A broader coalition for action will be needed to secure this. The dominant voice in the run-up to the summit, in almost all countries, was that of environmental and development NGOs. These groups played an absolutely vital role in ensuring the presence of world leaders in Copenhagen, and in the progress made there. But the environmental and moral international case is not engaging enough members of the general public, as too many powerful stakeholders remain uninvolved, and much of the business community remains remarkably passive, or indeed even hostile, given the magnitude of the issues at stake.

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### Successful national strategies

A global commitment to action on the scale necessary is a prerequisite for success. But it is national climate change strategies which will ultimately determine success or failure. The key challenges here are natural territory for the centre-left. Climate change policy must deliver on economic and social grounds, re-orientating our economies away from high carbon emissions, while creating jobs and managing the social impacts of this transition.

The perception that these issues are in conflict in the short-term has been a major cause of the limited support for climate change policy. These tensions are real and significant, but they are by no means insurmountable. Until this strategy is developed and communicated effectively, political parties of whatever hue will be unable to convince their electorates to support ambitious climate change policies. There are three key elements of the new national strategies that governments will need to incorporate if they are to succeed.

First, we must capture the public's attention by highlighting and delivering the opportunities that climate change policy presents. This can only be achieved if those in government responsible for economic and industrial policy are persuaded to play a leadership role. This will not be straightforward, as these departments have other long-established priorities and, in many cases, have tended to regard climate change policy primarily as a threat to their interests. It will require decisive political leadership to achieve this shift, and will not be possible in the short-term in all countries.

Governments of left and right in countries such as Germany and Denmark have adopted this approach, and secured substantial gains as a result. The scale of these opportunities, particularly in the short-term, should not be exaggerated. But the political opportunity to highlight, secure and celebrate wealth creation and employment from the low-carbon transition is waiting to be grasped.

Second, successful national climate change strategies must contain flagship policies that are politically effective in the short-term. These early wins should include policies that deliver real, visible benefits to the general public, and policies that provide for progress on a smaller scale but are nevertheless popular with the electorate. They will of course vary greatly according to the political circumstances of particular countries. They could include higher fuel efficiency standards, in response to concerns over oil imports; energy efficiency programmes that cut bills and create jobs; and real-time displays and smart meters in the home that give householders a new technology that increases their awareness and cuts their energy bills.

Third, governments must place a much stronger emphasis on tackling the potentially significant impacts of climate change policy on both the poor and businesses in certain sectors. Energy prices and environmental taxes on transport are the key issues here, and while politically controversial, they can be successfully addressed through careful policy design. Social democrats will not need persuading of the strong moral case for this, given the inequity of imposing proportionately higher costs on those less able to pay both environmental taxes and energy bills. There is also a strong political case, given the high risk of public hostility to inequitable approaches.

The case for a socially just approach has been championed, among others, by progressive sections of the trades union movement. The International Trade Union Congress has been making the case for a Just Transition during the recent international climate change negotiations.<sup>5</sup>

### Global action: an approach for the future

The prospects for an international breakthrough in 2010 are poor following the chaos of Copenhagen. But action at national level is heavily influenced by perceptions of the commitments of others, in both large and small countries. International momentum was one of the great casualties at Copenhagen, and it must be rapidly restored; we must rebuild trust, accelerate coordinated national action, and ultimately secure commitments to action on the scale necessary in a global treaty. There are three essential elements of a successful future approach.

First, we need a shared analysis of the urgency of this challenge. Too few countries currently recognise the need for collective action in line with the scientific evidence.

The prospects for this will be much improved if our political leaders come together and collectively champion new initiatives, involving countries from both north and south. With good diplomacy, the United Nations, G20, World Bank and others could all play leading roles. There are four areas where our political leaders can capture public attention and set an agenda for the future:

- analysis of the potential human and economic costs of the current response, and the four to five degree rise in average global temperatures that it could deliver;
- analysis of the opportunities presented by a more rapid global transition to a low-carbon future;
- highlight the costs to business of doing nothing to tackle emissions, and create pressure for more constructive engagement; and
- mobilising the security case for more action.

5. International Trade Union Congress statement on climate change [www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/climat\\_EN\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/climat_EN_Final.pdf)

Meaningful action in these areas will involve world leaders coming together to share with their electorates the truth about the inadequacy of the Copenhagen Accord, and develop the case for more ambitious action on targets, finance, technology and other issues. Many recognise this privately already, and will support initiatives of this kind.

Second, we need to dramatically step up global co-operation, to act now in areas such as deforestation, renewable energy sources, carbon capture and storage, and finance for adaptation. The EU has been most active here however over the past two years there has been a marked increase in rhetorical commitment in other fora. The G8 and the Major Economies Forum, for example, have set shared goals and agreed to co-operate on issues such as carbon capture and storage plants and renewable energy. But these discussions have not as of yet translated into meaningful co-operation. Agreements on carbon capture and storage, for instance, have not led to the construction of a single large-scale CCS plant. Success will require greater co-operation at all levels, and the EU can and should be at the forefront of this.

Third, we need to persuade countries to “make promises they can’t break”, and it is here that a legally binding global treaty is of central importance. There is widespread support for this, but resistance from China in particular has diminished international confidence. A legal treaty will bind nations together, provide a stronger signal to investors, and contain far stronger mechanisms for monitoring and reporting. But this treaty alone will not be sufficient to ensure that countries are making promises they can’t break; we also need to establish a far more effective institutional framework to manage these processes.

### Creating the political climate

The Copenhagen summit must be a cause of reflection by every social democrat committed to improving the long-term collective prosperity of their electorates. Climate change is, above all, a political problem. We know a great deal about the science of climate change; we have a mix of technologies to tackle it within reach, and we are increasingly clear about the policies that would help to deploy them. But we have not yet put in place political strategies that create the necessary social foundations for government action. This is partly a challenge for the voluntary sector, but the approach taken by politicians can greatly strengthen public support for action.

National governments hold the key to success. The essential characteristics of successful national climate change strategies will be outlined in my forthcoming pamphlet. The critical task for 2010 and beyond is to develop new strategies that drive emissions reduction, and foster the public support that will make action politically sustainable. Internationally, we need to rebuild momentum by developing a shared analysis of the need for action and co-operation now in areas where there already exists widespread agreement. If we can do so, the negotiations of 2009-10 can still prove to be a significant step along the path to ensuring our future prosperity and security.

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